

Benton County looks at cost of county seat move

By Michelle Dupler, Herald staff writer

PROSSER -- Benton County commissioners agreed unanimously Monday to start the search for a consultant to figure out just what it will take to move the county seat.

Voters will decide Nov. 2 whether to move the seat from its traditional home in Prosser to the more populous Kennewick, where many county services already are located.

State law requires the county to complete a financial analysis of the potential move and make the report public at least 60 days before the election.

The analysis must consider the costs of relocation, cost to county employees who would be affected and probable effects of the move on Prosser and Kennewick.

The possible county seat move has been championed by retired Superior Court Judge Fred Staples, who first recommended the move in 1984 based on the claim most county employees already worked in Kennewick.

Voters declined to move the county seat that year, but Staples never gave up the idea, and in December turned in enough signatures to put the idea to a second vote.

Commissioners heard from the elected officials whose offices will be most affected by a move that they need more staff and space to meet the demand in their Kennewick offices regardless of what voters decide about the county seat.

"As far as what (a move) would mean, I don't see much of an impact on our needs," said County Administrator David Sparks.

Sparks, Auditor Brenda Chilton and Treasurer Duane Davidson said in the case of a county seat move, they gradually would phase their Prosser operations over to Kennewick, leaving skeleton crews in Prosser to act as satellite offices.

A new state law that went into effect in July allows counties to provide offices outside of the county courthouse as long as offices also are maintained within the courthouse.

But what elected county officials really want is a joint administration building where all of their offices can be located, Davidson said.

"There is a lot of interaction between the Treasurer's Office and Assessor's Office," he said. "People come into my office thinking they need the assessor and vice versa. It would be nice if someday we were together. We would all benefit from an administrative building whenever we could afford to build it."

After the commissioners' meeting Monday, Sparks said he'll prepare a request for proposals to solicit consultants, but won't know how much a consultant might cost until proposals come in.

Also Monday:

w Commissioners heard a request from Clerk Josie Delvin for about \$49,000 to pay for someone to collect unpaid juvenile fines and restitution. The money would come from the clerk collection fund and not out of her department's current expense budget, she said.

The position would collect money from adults with lingering unpaid fines imposed on them as juveniles. A similar strategy in Spokane resulted in collecting about \$2 million, she said.

She expects about 2,500 collection cases would come to her office if commissioners approve.

w Jim Milton, director of Yakima Basin Water Resources Agency, gave an update on a groundwater study by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Water rights in the Yakima basin currently are overappropriated, meaning there may not be enough water for future development. And more water is needed to maintain fish populations, he said.

"We do have a crisis," Milton said.

He asked commissioners to support the agency in working on the issue with state and federal agencies. Commissioners took no action on it Monday.

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Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/04/06/965463/benton-county-to-look-for-consultant.html#ixzz0kLcb9nJl>